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ABSTRACT

The benefits that the microcomputer offers the school district--and the district's public relations office in particular--are significant and should be taken advantage of. Although microcomputers increase the already large amount of information available to administrators, they also enable the user to select and coordinate information efficiently. Postponing computer purchases while waiting for conclusive product refinement is a mistake. The district could be saving money and gaining expertise while waiting for improved products. In addition, the value of used equipment is remaining fairly high, so replacing equipment with improved products does not represent a great loss. Among the advantages of microcomputers in the public relations office are reductions in district typesetting costs ranging from 40 percent to 60 percent, more effective use of press releases by newspapers, more thorough surveying and analysis of survey data, and effective day-to-day control over school finance campaigns. Other uses include word processing for all writing functions, obtaining access to computer-based information networks, and performing numerous accounting processes. (PGD)

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ADAPTING COMPUTER RESOURCES TO SCHOOL COMMUNICATION NEEDS

By Clem Cleveland, ASPR, Owner
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For Presentation: Tuesday, July 3, 1984
9:00 - 12:00 noon
Seattle Seminar, NSPRA

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The microcomputer is a instrument that can easily be adapted to practically every communication function of the school district's Public Relations office. At one moment, this machine can be used much like a standard typewriter, another minute it's an adding machine having the capability to perform sophisticated statistical calculations; in a twinkling, it is communicating with other computers over great distances through the telephone system. The potential for applying this electronic tool to school communications purposes is unlimited.

The implications that the microcomputer has for shaping the operations of the school Public Relations office run the gamut from increased efficiency, cost savings to adding some new twists to the Public Relations person's responsibilities.

Here are some considerations:

* John Naisbitt, MEGATRENDS, said this nation has moved from an industrial to an informational society. He also said that with hi-tech, there is a need for hi-touch.

* Many school superintendents report they are being bombarded with too much information. This was also one of the reasons given for not joining NSPRA's electronic network, ED-LINE ... Cleveland survey 1984 (unreported).

As the school Public Relations administrator begins to recognize the value of the microcomputer, a new discipline must be developed within this P/R person. With the initial introduction of the microcomputer into the district's communication's office, the first thought may be to use the machine to dash through all of the information sources, like one would scurry after-hours in a candy store. With a little practice on the machine, this can be done. Results of such uncontrolled plundering will quickly surface. The superintendents may be expressing a common complaint that we all share. We are getting too much information. There is too much news and not enough time is being taken to turn this quantity into quality products.

The school P/R person, with the microcomputer, may be compared to a package distributor or a warehouse manager. One electronic source, NSPRA's EDNET, provides current, daily news on educational happenings from throughout the country. Also, EDNET gives good items that teachers can use for their classrooms, suggestions for everything from management processes to maintenance of school buildings are covered as well as special events like the "Excellence in Education" report. The problem for the school communications person is to develop formats in which this news can be packaged. There is a need to localize and make these items germane to the specific audiences that they are intended. This means that there is a need to develop special newsletters, memos or, possibly, bulletins that can be rapidly prepared so that the information may be quickly disseminated to selected groups of people.

The uses for microcomputers in school Public Relations offices fall into four distinct areas: (1) Word Processing, (2) Database Management, (3) Typesetting,

and (4) Accounting. When closely examined, these four areas show that school districts are adapting the microcomputer to their needs as follows:

1. Word Processing
2. Utilization of previously written documents - updating these documents with minimum time and labor being expended.
3. Document preparation for Board reports
4. Proofreading of manuscripts
5. Analysis of manuscripts for readability
6. Thesaurus use for assist in manuscript preparation
7. Mailing Lists
8. Surveying
9. Accounting
10. Collecting information from other sources like Ed-LINE and the Source, Compuserve and Micronet
11. Developing all materials needed for finance campaigns involving past precinct voting trends and monitoring activities of election volunteers plus tabulating the actual identified people who report to the polls on election day
12. Transmitting Press Releases directly into newsrooms
13. Typesetting
14. Consultation service - nationwide
15. Inventory Control
16. Budget Preparation
17. Daily, weekly, monthly and year end budget summaries for maintaining expenditure control against budgetary projections - forecasting final budget statements to reflect deficits and surpluses - or, to make budgetary adjustments where shortfalls appear evident
18. Negotiations: document preparation and analysis of economic issues/proposals
19. Cost comparison for purchasing
20. Bars, graphs, statistical data preparation
21. Student/staff evaluation processes
22. Building monitoring for boilers and maintenance programs
23. Staff absentee reports and analysis
24. Maintaining student data
25. Bus Scheduling
26. Maintaining maintenance schedules on district vehicles and analyzing each vehicle for efficient operation
27. Food Service - Control of: food purchased, served and waste, cash received, accounting practices and personnel studies
28. Staff and administrative assignments
29. Monitoring general education, special education and categorical funded programs
30. Monitoring student performance data for purposes

of assessing strengths of educational programs, instructional approaches and individual teachers for their ability to transfer instructional knowledge to their students

31. Creating MBO programs plus Gantt charts for the purpose of monitoring maintenance of timelines, and producing organizational charts.

As the school Public Relations Office generally finds itself burdened with the task of converting most of the above grocery list into one printed form or another, the microcomputer should be looked upon today as a necessity for getting the job done. This electronic equipment is a tremendous timesaver and conservator of human resources.

The technological developments that are being made in microcomputers designed for business applications are overwhelming. It is almost impossible to keep up with the changes in equipment and new, more powerful programs are surfacing practically daily. This information provides good arguments for superintendents and school budget decision makers to say, "We'll hold off on the purchase of micro equipment until the equipment and programs are more fully developed." With this kind of thinking, it is a certainty that the microcomputer will never find its way into the communication's office as the developmental stage for the electronic industry will never cease. Tomorrow, there will be greater, more powerful introductions of hardware and software. It has been thought that prices will appreciably drop on models that are being phased out. Surprisingly, prices have not significantly changed on 64K, 8 bit machines over the last couple of years. There has developed a ready market for good, used equipment. So, when the demand remains high, prices tend to remain stable and this is what is presently happening with the microcomputer market. In the meantime, for those who have not seen a microcomputer land upon their office's desk, this wait-and-see approach is costing the school district; especially, the communication's departmental budget, considerable money.

THE ORLANDO SURVEY AND TYPESETTING

This last year, I conducted a survey of the Orlando, Seminar (NSPRA) participants. This survey found 52% of those attending the seminar to be using microcomputer equipment and of this group, 59% intended to replace their present equipment within the next couple of years for machines having larger memory capacity and the ability to operate the more advanced programs that have recently come on the market. In the meantime, these people have had an opportunity to learn how to operate their existing equipment and to become efficient in the use of their microcomputers.

The survey also revealed that the average school district will spend \$5,000 each year for typesetting in the production stage of their brochures and newsletters. School districts who are linking their microcomputers to electronic, digital typesetters are seeing a reduction in their typesetting costs that range between 40% and 60%. Aside from the savings in personnel time for the creation of printed matter, actual dollars-and-cents savings with this single microcomputer application can run to \$3,000, or more in a given year. This savings in typesetting costs alone will more than repay the costs for microcomputer equipment in these school districts.

GET IT INTO THE NEWSPAPER ELECTRONICALLY

One of the prime goals for most public relations offices is to place more and more stories in local newspapers. Often, members of boards of education and superintendents look upon the space in newspapers devoted to telling about the good things that are happening in their schools as a measure of the effectiveness of their public relations efforts. Newspapers throughout the country are rapidly turning their newsrooms over to the computer. Reporters are now filing stories directly into the newspaper's computer system. Even those reporters who are on out-of-town assignments are using small, lap-size microcomputers to give on-the-spot reports to their city rooms. The image of today's city editor sitting at the desk, staring into a glowing, green screen is a correct one. The computer is quickly replacing editing pencils and now, those on the city desk are directly manipulating the newspaper's copy before it is sent to the composing room.

In the composing room, the clank and squirts of the linotype machine are gone. No more are there pigs being molded. The tinkling sound of scattering mats hitting the floor don't echo any longer. The composing rooms today are environmentally controlled and are part of the newspaper's computerized network. The copy that is sent from the city desk contains the proper coding for typesetting and now, the electronic cycle is complete. From computer to computer, the news that is printed in papers is produced by people working at keyboards, typing electronic messages that appear on microcomputer screens.

With the microcomputer, a little patience and practice, this total newspaper's computerized system is open for use. Once access is gained through the MODEM, the editorial desk will welcome electronic stories, providing they are written in crisp, journalistic style. City editors recognize the time savings of microcomputers. With "data transfer," they no longer need to assign a reporter to rewrite, or just "keyboard" the formal press release. If the editor chooses, the electronic story can be passed along in the computer system for typesetting and page placement. He may prefer to hand the electronic story over to a reporter to have details added or do whatever it is that editors tell reporters to do with press releases. The final result of this effort is that the school district should see more stories gaining ink with less editing and less errors in story reporting, especially errors with names. If there are faults with electronic stories, there will be no one to blame but the P/R person who originally composed the story. The P/R person must exercise an additional caution when filing electronic stories by carefully proofreading work before it is transmitted.

SURVEYS

The microcomputer, like any computer, was designed to handle data, in large quantities. This feature makes it a natural for compiling the results of surveys. It is possible, with a little effort, to produce personalized surveys and literally, survey people to death. Tabulating the results of these surveys can be completed with a tap of a key once all the data has been entered. Interesting cross comparisons between one field and another can be made; also, numerical counting, averaging of response groups, statistical weighting poses no problem, forecasting trends by asking a question like, "What would happen if?;" and take the same data and review it from various perspectives, graph the results, print the results, or possibly, make some real decisions based upon the results ... but, always remember, Ford built the Edsel based upon what the people at Ford thought they saw in the results of a survey.

With a microcomputer, the avenues for surveying the school community are unlimited. The needs to do this job are: a microcomputer that has a sufficiently large enough RAM (internal memory), a letter quality printer, a word processing program that will merge a file while in print mode, a decent database management program for generating mailing lists and one of the more advanced accounting programs like Lotus 1-2-3. With this inventory, there is a need to spend some time learning to make the programs work together.

An effective way to create a survey is with a form letter. Personalize the letter by having the name of each recipient appear in the salutation and possibly, make personal reference to them, their street or neighborhood within the introductory letter of the survey. The questions within the survey can also have this personalized touch by beginning a question with the recipient's name and other questions may refer specifically to their street or elementary school area. Provide self addressed, stamped envelopes for return of the survey and on the first mailing, a very high return rate, 50% to 80% should be expected. Also, promise that respondents to the survey will receive a copy of the results, or some other fair offer.

As microcomputers become more commonplace, like the office typewriters, I can easily foresee the time when elementary school buildings will be producing their own community surveys. In this particular area, I believe the school communication's officer will have to initiate some sound guidelines to be followed by building administrators. Without monitoring and control, our communities will be surveyed without control and the purpose of the survey method for gathering decision making information could be badly overworked.

Just as the school Public Relations administrator should be aware to monitor community surveys that may be undertaken by others within the district, it is good practice to bring the district's R & D department into the process of creating the survey questions. The business of designing surveys is a specialty for researchers and these people can often be counted upon to give sound advice for survey design. The point is, the microcomputer is a powerful tool. However, as we set about to tap into some of this power, like community surveys, Public Relations people need to be reminded that they have the expertise in communications and others in their district have the skills to produce research documents. Through a team effort, the district can benefit greatly by getting information from the community in a form that otherwise would be cost prohibitive.

....AND, FINANCE ISSUES

For many school districts throughout the country, there is the need to go to the voter requesting annual budget approval or for approval to levy general school property taxes, and sometimes tax increases are needed. For these districts, their financial condition hinges upon the results of these issues.

There are no absolutes for getting voters to approve these questions of finance; yet, there has been some solid, proven guidelines developed by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) for the conduct of winning elections. These guidelines are marketed by NSPRA under a package called, YOU CAN WIN AT THE POLLS.

The microcomputer can prove to be a valuable instrument when its strengths are focused upon a school district's finance campaign. As outlined above, a personalized community survey can be designed for the purpose of identifying the "positive" elector. A better process is to include the person-to-person contact, as outlined in YOU CAN WIN AT THE POLLS and develop the huge volunteer network that is

needed to carry the election. Use the micro to maintain the database on the identified "YES" voter by having their name, address, telephone number along with the volunteer's name who made the identification included as part of each, individual record.

As the campaign progresses, the database should swell as more and more names are entered. At anytime there is a need to draft personalized letters to select groups of people within the database, the process is simple and follows the format for the generation of a form letter.

Tabulations can be maintained on the accounting program with projections that help to identify the condition of the campaign coming to election day's final outcome. Where the school district has adopted the "quota" concept for individual voting precincts or buildings as part of the campaign process, the tabulations maintained on the accounting program will help to quickly identify areas of voter strength and weakness. By monitoring these trends as part of the campaign process, the Public Relations person remains constantly in tune with the campaign and can respond according to the needs that begin to disclose themselves.

On election day, it is possible to use the combination of the database program with the accounting program to maintain records of those who said they have voted (from the reports given by the volunteers) and make tabulations that help to project the final outcome of the election. All of this information is valuable and can be reused as a fountain of facts for helping to write the final election analysis. In future elections, the same information contained on the database and the accounting program can be reused to help give direction for the new campaign.

SOME WORDS ON WORD PROCESSING

Fundamental to adapting computer resources to school communication needs rests with an efficient word processing program. Ease of entry into the program is a consideration when comparing one program with another. As there are more than a thousand programs on the market that claim to be able to perform word processing functions, it is impossible to have knowledge on all of them. In fact, most microcomputer users find one program that works well for them and their equipment and look no further. As the need to expand the ways for using what has been written, it may be necessary to use more than one program. Some programs just seem to work more easily for one style of writing than another.

Most good word processing programs provide for functions such as these: search/replace, block move, block copy and block delete; screen scrolling forward and backward as well as single line scrolling forward and backward; character or line insert and delete; spill printing (simultaneously printing one document while editing or writing another), inclusion of one or more document files into a new document (or writing effort) and merging one file with another while in the print mode. Also, a good word processing program should support various features of a letter quality, daisy wheel, specialty printer like: automatic page counting, forcing a new page, control of margins, bold face; superscripting and subscripting, underlining and control of characters and lines per inch.

It is natural to expect that the word processing program should support a "Spelling Proofer." If the program being used does not have a spell proofer as part of its package, shop around for another program. Some programs also support a built-in, electronic Thesaurus which is a nice feature but not essential.

The combination of a good word processing program with a daisy wheel, letter quality printer, gives the ability to produce school newsletters, simple (quick) brochures, produce board reports and perform every writing function undertaken by

the P/R office. With the combination of a MODEM, materials from NSPRA's EDNET or ED-LINE (electronic newswire) can be accepted and these materials can be included into school publications. The MODEM will also permit material to be transmitted to an electronic, digital typesetter for the purpose of having the electronic matter converted to crisp, photo-typeset material. The options for having what has been written on the microcomputer and transformed onto the printed page are unlimited. Without the micro, the alternatives are few.

USING ED-LINE

NSPRA is the first of the national education organizations to establish and electronic informational network. Microcomputer access to this network is through telephone lines. The material contained on this service, known as ED-LINE, is fresh and maintained twice daily. There is information that is usable for classroom teachers, central office administrators, building administrators and some is valuable for parents. It is a decision that the school P/R person must make as to where the information is to be sent and what format is to be used for reproduction of this information.

Under the agreement with NSPRA, subscribers to EDNET may reproduce the material that is taken from ED-LINE. This makes it possible to use this information for the creation of special, in-house newsletters. News that has specific value to the superintendent, business department, and state and federal programs can be shared with them in memo form.

The greatest problem faced by those who first begin using the EDNET service is one of being able to work efficiently, using the least amount of telephone connect time, and getting the most information possible for the time spent. Even though there is a main menu that can be used for selecting the various categories of information offered by NSPRA on this service, it is far wiser to use the "FAST" commands to move from one information section to another.

To get the most information for the least amount of computer connect time, one must spend some time planning. By using the FAST commands, exact information needed for specific publications being produced by the communications office is gathered quickly. After a couple of exploratory trips through the various ED-LINE information sectors, the school Public Relations person should have clear vision as to the information that is needed and how the information will be used once it is taken from the service.

ACCOUNTING and other applications

There are several good accounting programs on the market. Just as with word processing and depending upon the microcomputer in the school P/R office, there will probably be a need to adopt two different accounting programs that can be used for specific purposes. At the moment, there doesn't seem to be one program that is suitable for all needs.

An accounting program should move easily and quickly from one entry to the next and from one section to another. The ability to "split screen," simultaneously showing one or more areas of the spreadsheet is a tremendous advantage when the P/R person is monitoring a program or departmental budget.

The value of having program or departmental budgets maintained on the microcomputer is that this method of accounting provides opportunities for the administrator to closely monitor expenditures made and create projections for year end balances. The usual delays in waiting for computerized printouts from large

mainframes are avoided when using the micro for this purpose. Depending upon the person who makes the actual entries on the microcomputer of expenditures and how often the entries are made, it is possible to maintain budgetary records accurate to the moment.

SOME FUTURISTIC THINKING

The advent of the microcomputer may bring with it a total change in the style in which school Public Relations practitioners go about their business. With the machine at home, it is possible for the P/R person to conduct the school district's complete communication's program. We may see the day when this may happen.

As John Naisbitt, in MEGATRENDS, said with hi-tech, there is a need for hi-touch. The school communicator will have the need to maintain visibility within the school district and it is doubtful that we will see the time when there won't exist the need to have materials produced in written form.

As more micro equipment finds its way into the homes of our students, school personnel, parents and residents of the community will continue to depend upon the printed word as their main source for information. It is expected that that the huge rivers of electronic information that is presently available, these rivers will continue to swell. The expectation that we may soon reach informational flood stages. It is for the school Public Relations person to add the touch of quality to the information that finds its way through the microcomputer to the printed page.